

Free Shelves FAQs



Hello neighbors!

We are a small group of long-time Arlington residents, volunteering to spread “Free Shelves” to different neighborhoods of Arlington. Might you consider starting Free Shelves in your area, or help host them at a good location?

Read more below, and if interested please contact us at Arlington.free.shelves@gmail.com.

Warmly, Sarah Trilling (Arlington Heights), Christopher and Anne Ellinger (East Arlington)

What are “Free Shelves?”

Free shelves are shelves in a public area where people can leave everyday items they don't want. People can then browse items that have been left there and take for free any they might use. Free shelves are most often outdoors, but they can be indoors, too. Free shelves can be large or small. They can serve an organization, or passersby in a neighborhood, or both. Shelves can be “hosted” by a few friends (placed outdoors on one person's property) or by a small group at a community organization, school, church, temple or mosque.

Why host Free Shelves?

Free Shelves accomplish so much with so little! Free Shelves can:

- Keep useable items out of landfill
- Enable people to more easily declutter their homes
- Support people who need to stretch their budgets
- Build friendly connections among Free Shelves users
- Provide a satisfying volunteer project requiring very little time, money or special skills

What does it take to host Free Shelves?

- **A public area** for the shelves, indoors or outdoors, where lots of people regularly come and go, and where it is easy to bring belongings and to look through the shelves without getting in people's

way. For instance, the Free Shelves pictured above, on Linwood St., are currently hosted by Calvary Church, on a low wall outside their building. The shelves are used by the whole neighborhood as well as the church members, since the wall abuts a sidewalk that gets a lot of pedestrian traffic as people walk to and from Spy Pond.

- **A small group of volunteers**– we like to call them “elves”--who help keep the shelves orderly and regularly remove any trash.
- **Shelves.** Many different sizes and types of shelving could work, depending upon the location and the caretaking energy. For instance, the main shelves on Linwood St. are made up of ten, 12” square wire boxes fastened together, three boxes high. These shelves always have lots of items and belongings come and go with great frequency. But closer to the pond, on one household’s wall, is a small wooden bookcase, just one foot high and two feet long, with the sign, “Teeny Tiny Sharing Shelf.” These little shelves are also well-used for teeny give-away objects.
- **Some initial decisions.** What kinds of items do you want to allow or not allow? How will you let people know about the Free Shelves and the guidelines? Who is empowered to solve problems or make decisions about the shelves?

Can’t people give and receive free items in other ways?

Yes, there are many online sites where people can post items for free or look for items they want (e.g., Facebook’s Everything Free in Arlington, Next Door, Craig’s List). However, using online sites takes a lot more work for both the givers and the receivers than simply putting things on local Free Shelves and browsing what’s there. Many people aren’t willing to do the work these online sites require—so enormous amounts of usable stuff goes into the trash. Arlington now has a “swap shed” - but it’s only open a few hours a week, and only accepts items in very good shape.

Might you be interested?

We are happy to answer questions, help you figure out your needs, and provide practical support as you start up your Free Shelves. Please contact: Arlington.free.shelves@gmail.com

What some people have said about existing Free Shelves:

“I put out a few old vases and within an hour they were all taken!”

“Some of my favorite plates came from those Free Shelves!”

“I’m delighted how other people’s junk sometimes becomes my treasure!”

“I hate seeing good things going to waste on trash days—and now I bring some of the best things over to the Free Shelves so they can get a second life!”